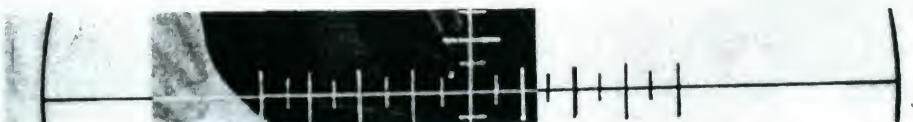


black riot

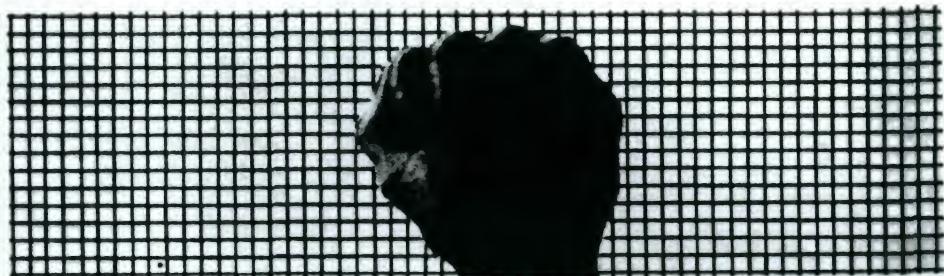
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The difference between riots and protests has more to do with who and where than what

— Julie Mehretu, Excerpt (Riot) 2003

As thousands in Khartoum, Sudan, and surrounding areas took the streets at the end of September and Twitter blew up under the hashtag #SudanRevols, I waited patiently for Western media to catch up. When it finally addressed that something was happening in Sudan, their message was clear: “Amidst Riots, President Bashir won’t be attending the UN conference.” read one headline. I probably shouldn’t have been surprised. Even though the same media had been enthralled by the mass protests in Egypt, Turkey, Brazil, Greece, and Spain; Sudan’s mass protests received three short paragraphs, focused on their effects on the nation’s president, with “Riots” in the headline.

I’ve been to protests in Istanbul and Greece. I’ve seen windows smashed, graffiti drawn, Molotovs prepared, and things set alight. Still, the situations where lighter skinned people were filling the photographs: protests. When darker skinned people are involved? Riots. The decision to call one riots and the other protests has nothing to do with the amount of violence in the demonstrations. Violence is a realistic factor, and sometimes, a tactic, in all of these protests. Resisting



Blacks being searched in a police station



15. Police claimed that black snipers had taken aim at them, including drivers of Newark Police Department vans like this one. It had likely been used to transport arrestees to the federal post office building, where US Marshals watched over several dozen prisoners during the riots. © Media General Communications Holdings, LLC. (Newark Public Library / Newark Evening News)

is never peaceful. If the State fears you, it will crack down on you violently, despite your kumbaya circle.

Protesters' natural response to a State's violent crackdown (usually police brutality) is self-defense. The self-defense is often barricades – blocking the police from getting to the crowd of people. Barricades can be formed with large objects, fires, or human beings. Those on the front lines can use their bodies as buffers between the police and the rest of the crowd, stopping the police from getting to the masses. Rocks may be thrown at the police to push them back. In the face of police brutality, without self-defense, a protest usually cannot survive.

With the destruction of property, violence can turn from an aspect of self-defense to a useful offensive tactic. Nothing gets the attention of the elite like taking away or destroying what they value above all else: property. In America, property is racial. It always has been. Consider the racist violence which stretches from slavery to lynching to the ongoing extrajudicial killings of black men and women. For 300 years, the very idea of a black person's freedom was a direct threat to white men's property. After slavery, lynchings were often targeted at blacks who had gained relative wealth and therefore, challenged the wealth and property of white men. This year, George Zimmerman was found not guilty for killing



14. Earl Harris, a UCC trustee from the South Ward who was active on Area Board 3 and ran for city council in both 1966 and 1970, submitted a photo of his restaurant, which advertised its barbecue with "soul sauce." Harris claimed state and Newark police had shot up his windows. (New Jersey State Archives)

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an unarmed black child—who he assumed was breaking into homes in his gated, white community, or threatening the property of his white neighborhood. When property is destroyed by black protesters, it must always be understood in the context of the historical racialization of property. When the same system that refuses to protect black children comes out to protect windows, what is valued over black people in America becomes very clear.

One cannot discuss the immorality of damaging property without devaluing the rage that brought protesters to this point. You, too, have to decide which one you value more: human life or property. As Vinz so eloquently says in the film *La Haine*, when rage spills into the streets after a brutal police beating left a young man from the ghetto on life support: "A homeboy's dying: fuck your car."

In Sudan, where IMF-backed austerity measures have hiked gas prices so high that the average person can't afford to get to work or eat a basic meal, destroying gas stations and signs of wealth has an obvious symbolic significance. Forcing the question once more, who do **you** answer to: starved citizens or a fancy building?

But for the darker skinned (Africans and Blacks in the Diaspora), the violence of a few always represents the actions of the whole. In fact, it is our entire **colonized**

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Fig. 6.7. (top) The governor of New Jersey ordered the deployment of the National Guard and state police by the third day of the riots, sharply escalating the level of violence as well as the number of injuries and fatalities. (Courtesy of New Jersey News Service and Newark Public Library)

Fig. 6.8. (bottom) The fear of continuing disorder and violence led the governor to authorize the mobilization of jeeps and armored tanks, which were maintained at a makeshift headquarters in a high school athletic stadium. (Courtesy of New Jersey News Service and Newark Public Library)

history in a nutshell. For us, there is no nuance. No acknowledgement that in a group of thousands, a handful of people decided to break a window. Compare this to Greece, where media takes the time to emphasize that “99 percent of the protests in Greece are completely peaceful.”

To say that what's happening in Greece or Istanbul are protests that involve violence is to say that they are fighting non-peacefully for a greater cause. This is, from what I saw, true. But to diminish Sudan's protests as “riots” because of their violence is to say the people protesting are violent beings absent of complex thinking and tactical strategies. In short, it's racist.

The term “riot” implies disorganization, running amok with no end means, goals or demands outside of individual gain. Rioting implies you're not on the streets for a greater cause or a greater advancement. It implies you're more interested in looting a store for a television than breaking and taking property as a subversive act. It reproduces the racist claims about black subjects: that they are violent, ignorant, selfish, and depoliticized.

Many on the left called the predominantly black 2011 London uprisings a “consumer riot,” arguing that they were not a moment of resistance but a reflection of greed run amok. Breaking and taking property happens in pairs.



Whites stoning the black to death

Since the elite detest both, they are equally effective. But for black protests, it's easy for others to fixate their colonial gaze and forget the breaking aspect while focusing in on the looting since, you know, black people steal. The historical context is, of course, conveniently ignored. Since colonization and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, white wealth has been and continues to be built off the backs of black labor, off the exploitation of African resources and bodies. But wait for the courts to grant reparations, and remain waiting. Looting is the opposite of apolitical; it is a direct redistribution of wealth. And yet, even on the left, when a black or African protester destroys and takes property, they are stripped of the tactical or historical will inherent in the decision. It is instead understood through the colonial conception of the political backwardness of black communities: they become apolitical rioters, pure and simple.

The media's method is clear with regards to African resistance: quietly declare the demonstrations "riots" and then move on to the next piece of news. No more than three paragraphs, if that. No nuance, no debate, no critical thinking so that it is an easy argument to make when the state puts rioters down like one would a rabid dog. Like in Newark, 1967, where the National Guard occupied the city, complete with snipers on rooftops that shot and killed black people for looting, or running, or



Crowds armed with bricks searching for a black



The arrival of the police

coming out of their homes. Or in Sudan, where police forces opened live ammunition on demonstrations and killed over 200 people in a week. State-sanctioned killing and military force is all of a sudden a "complicated" issue where there is no clear "good" side. Yet, while one group is destroying property, the other group is murdering human beings. When oppression from the state breeds outrage that is then silenced with state murder, how do we respond? Do we internalize and blame ourselves or are we persistent in our refusal to back down? At times some say protesters are "provoking" the police based on their tactics but how do we equate people destroying property to the state mass murdering its people? Why is property on the same level as living, and breathing human beings? When the state kills, we must ask ourselves how we got to the point where the blame is on anyone but the state and its actors.

Throughout the 20th century, the KKK and white rioters destroyed massive swaths of black property, not to mention murdering black people, usually with implicit or actual state support. More recently, the Greek Neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn would go into immigrant neighborhoods in Athens and destroy their stalls and storefronts (and also, murder immigrants), with little state resistance (indeed, many Athenian police are Golden Dawn supporters). The destruction of property is a red herring, used to divert attention from the fact that it

Table 19-1 / Public Reaction to Demonstrations and Riots, 1961-1967

Reference	Date and Source of Question	Public Reaction	
Freedom Riders	June 1961 Gallup	Unfavorable, 64% (of 63% of public who knew of the activity)	
Mass demonstrations by blacks	July 1963 Gallup	Unfavorable, whites only South, 73% North, 65%	
March on Washington	August 1963 Gallup	Unfavorable, 63% (of 69% of public who knew of the activity)	
Black tactics, specific:	October 1963 Harris	Unfavorable, whites only	
		Nationwide South	
Lie down in front of trucks at construction sites		91% 94%	
Sit-in at lunch counters		67 84	
Go to jail to protest discrimination		56 75	
Boycott products whose manufacturers do not hire enough blacks		55 66	
Actions blacks have taken to obtain civil rights, general	December 1963 NORC	Unfavorable, whites only South, 78% North, 59%	
Nature of black protest movement	December 1963 NORC	Percent white who say movement has been generally violent rather than peaceful: South, 63% North, 47%	
Picketing of political conventions	July 1964 Harris	Unfavorable, 76%	
Riots in New York, Rochester, and Jersey City	August 1964 Gallup	Unfavorable, 87%	
Continued demonstrations	November 1964 Gallup	Unfavorable, whites only, 73%	
Participation of clergymen in protest marches	April 1965 Gallup	Unfavorable, 56%	
Extent of Communist involvement in civil rights demonstrations	November 1965 Gallup	Percent white who say: not at all some a lot 51% 27% 22%	
Black demonstrations, general	1966 Harris June 1967 Harris	Unfavorable, whites only, 63% Unfavorable, whites only, 82%	
"Recent" riots	August 1967 Harris	Unfavorable, whites only, 88%	
Riots as organized efforts vs. spontaneous eruptions	August 1967 Harris	Percent who see riots as organized, whites only, 71%	

SOURCE: Compiled from Hazel Erskine, "The Polls: Demonstrations and Race Riots," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Winter 1967-1968, pp. 655-677.

is the goals, not the methods, of the protests that the media and the state object to.

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"Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them." — Assata Shakur

Most resistance is nonviolent, but those who choose to be nonviolent should not dismiss or distance themselves from others who use violence strategically. When demanding change, all tactics must be brought to the table.

Selective historians consider this unnecessary: they will use the Civil Rights Movement's nonviolent resistance as an example. They will demand that you stand perfectly still as you get sprayed by water hoses and attacked by police dogs. They'll conveniently forget to mention that while MLK was leading non-violent resistance in the form of sit-ins and marches, "riots" were raging through America's black ghettos. It was the potential for more riots, like those that exploded in Birmingham in 1963 as the freedom riders campaign grew increasingly resistant to police violence, that had Robert Kennedy convincing his brother to pass Civil Rights legislation, lest the whole country follow suit.

An Anatomy of the Ghetto Riots



Fig. 6.4. From 1955 to 1965, the mainstream media portrayed black demonstrators in the Jim Crow South as sympathetic victims of vicious white police, but the coverage of the riots in the northern cities always seemed to justify ever-increasing levels of white police force against black protesters. (Courtesy of New Jersey News Service and Newark Public Library)



Fig. 5.4. Robert Curvin emerged as a major leader in the 1960s and helped to organize demonstrations against discrimination and police brutality. On the first night of the riots, Curvin addressed a crowd outside the police precinct, a moment captured in a photo that was reprinted in copies of the *Kerner Commission Report*. (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968)

In a world where blacks are forced to wear their perceived violence on their skin, many will see violent tactics as moving backwards. Some will caution the masses against using violence towards property as a tactic. They will ask everyone to stay calm and collected. Pay attention to where they are yelling from (their luxury apartment, perhaps). The State and the elite are counting on this: the notion that all (black) violence is uncivilized or barbaric. But what is more realistically threatening than “moving backwards” is staying right where we are. In a society where black people are always-already guilty, pleading for change instead of demanding it will do just that.

Trying to change tactics in a desperate attempt to fit the media’s narrative is not an option, because the media’s narrative always ends with the world fundamentally unchanged. The media is obsessed with protests that receive a large scale of police brutality and at the same time, uncompromising in the idea that protesters must be “peaceful” by all means necessary. It’s pretty obvious that one cannot both defend themselves and fit this accepted profile. It’s almost as obvious that one can barely survive—both individually and as a movement—and fit this profile. The state kills us: the media wants us silent.

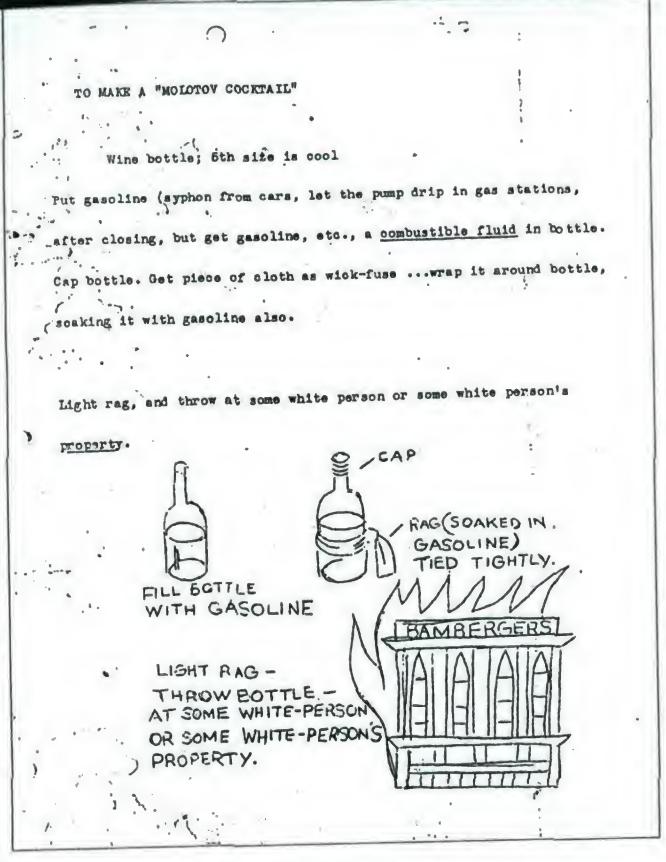


Fig. 5.3. To make a "Molotov Cocktail."

All this begs the question: Is mainstream media needed? Do we need its support? Despite media's non-coverage, when the government in Sudan realized protesters weren't going home after a week (despite the threat of death from live ammunition), they first promised they would give cash out to needy families and raise salaries. This, of course, didn't stop the protests. When people still didn't go home the government then arrested and detained 800 activists and journalists. This crackdown-generosity-crackdown vacillation is a tactic often used by the state when those in the streets have a chance of winning.

Instead, in order to win support, we should look no further than our communities. Protesting, after all, is just one form of resistance. When thousands aren't out on the streets (or preferably, while thousands are out on the streets), we should be working on building and existing in the type of world we'd like to see. Our communities should always be at the forefront of our minds. So these questions must always be asked: Which windows are being broken? Who are we hurting? What exactly are we destroying?

There was a great moment in Istanbul that happened over and over again. Police would shoot tear gas canisters into a crowd of people. People would panic and start

CITIES UNDER SIEGE



Fig. 7.2. The news coverage rarely showed the extent of police brutality against female protesters. Although black women participated in the civil disobedience and represented approximately 10 percent of arrests, including looting and curfew violations, much of law enforcement conduct proved to be unjustified and excessive. (Courtesy of New Jersey News Service and Newark Public Library)

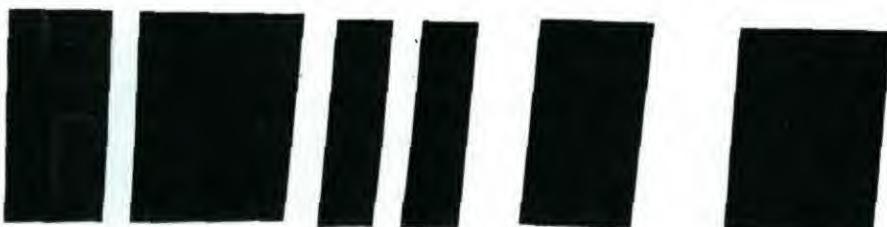
running. To escape the gas, they would duck into a nearby building, all the while coughing, spitting, eyes watering. Ten minutes later, with lingering tear gas still in the air, the crowd would re-emerge, smiles wide and looks that said, "we're still here." They would start moving forward, chanting louder, clapping in rhythm.

It's no wonder that shooting protesters dead in Sudan only resulted in more people out on the streets. After being detained, beaten, tortured and threatened with rape by security forces in Sudan, Rania Mamoun said, "Some experiences strengthen you, while others break you. When you're beaten to a pulp, your dignity is assaulted, your safety compromised, your freedom stolen, there is only one way forward - to continue what others initiated. There is no return, we can only go ahead, and that's what they do not know. Your beating and your torture does not frighten me nor break me. It will not force me to retreat...You ask me: Are you not afraid? And I say: I've become stronger."

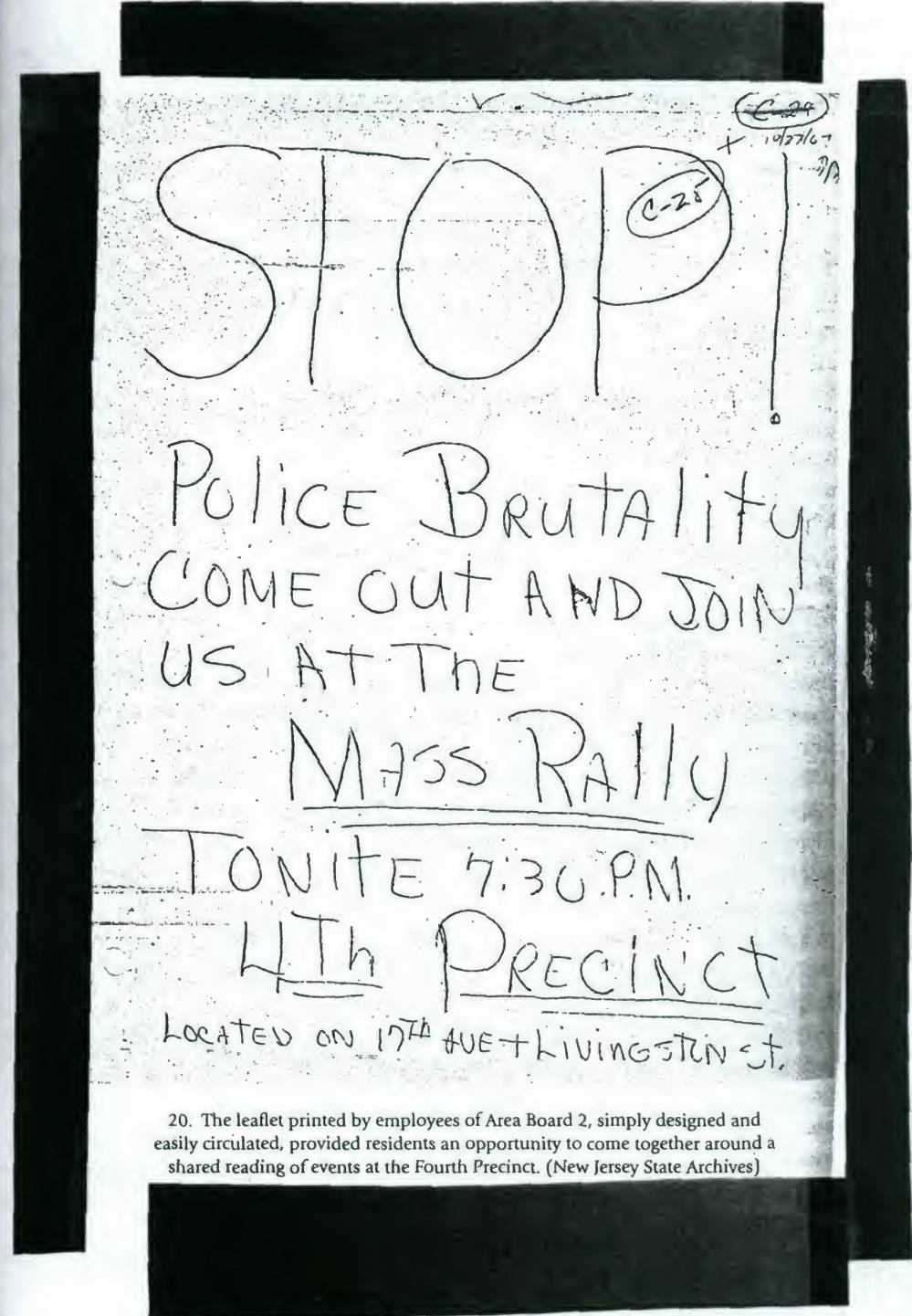
When our bodies are beaten and dismissed, our survival is dependent on our persistence. We don't need the mainstream media; instead, we should recognize that the media is a part of what we're up against: the dismissal of our dead bodies, the excuses for the hands that kill us.



Fig. 7.5. The specter of looting sparked a public outcry against the riots, in turn fueling negative publicity. Much of the looting involved household goods or apparel from department stores, rather than, as was often assumed, thefts from liquor stores. (Courtesy of New Jersey News Service and Newark Public Library)



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20. The leaflet printed by employees of Area Board 2, simply designed and easily circulated, provided residents an opportunity to come together around a shared reading of events at the Fourth Precinct. (New Jersey State Archives)

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